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# THE MESSAGE OF JESUS TO OUR MODERN LIFE. VI

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## AN OUTLINE BIBLE-STUDY COURSE OF THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE

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## PART II. THE PRINCIPLES OF JESUS AS APPLIED TO PROBLEMS OF LIFE

### STUDY VI

#### THE ECONOMIC LIFE

Technically speaking, Jesus has no economic teaching. His interest is not in wealth but in people. In this he is clearly consistent with his general purpose and method. Just as the family and its problems offered an occasion for him to apply his fundamental principles to the individual's moral and religious life, so the universal interest of humanity in material goods is an occasion for him to make new applications of his fundamental principles. In so doing, he does not develop any economic program. He is neither a socialist nor a champion of capitalism. In his teaching a man's life is more than his possessions.

Jesus does not deal with any phase of human interest abstractly. Everything is concrete. His experiences are not expressed philosophically, but with vivid concreteness as particular circumstances occasion them. His teaching as to wealth, like his teaching as to the family, is the expression of his application of eternal principles to practical social conditions.

These conditions, however, are not involved or perpetuated in Jesus' religious conceptions. This is noteworthy, for in many if not all great religions certain definite economic conceptions peculiar to the social life of the time in which the founder of the religion lived are so perpetuated as to make it all but impossible to maintain the religion in a different social order. The differences even between the religion of Jesus and the religion of the Old Testament at this point are marked.

## I. THE TEACHING OF THE OLD TESTAMENT CONCERNING PROPERTY AND INDUSTRY

The Old Testament, it will be recalled, is the record of a developing nation. Its legislation, however ideal it may be in certain elements, starts from definite conditions in which the nation developed. These conditions were themselves not originated by the Old Testament religion, but came from Babylonia, Egypt, and the older Semitic life in general. The legislation of Moses originated few economic conditions, but did undertake to improve those which the nation already possessed. We do not thoroughly appreciate the Old Testament until we see clearly that this historical basis was a condition under which the will of God was progressively revealed.

*First day.*—§ 90. *The legislation of the Old Testament assumes the existence of property as a social institution:* Gen. 12:1-9; 13:1-13; 30:25-31:21; 41:37-45. The Old Testament writers were not interested primarily in the origin of human institutions, although they incidentally use some of the beliefs current in their day. The Old Testament, centering as it does about the history of a nation, is particularly concerned with those who possess wealth as well as political power. Recall the stories of Abraham (Gen. 12:1-9; 13:1-13) and the Hebrew patriarchs Jacob and Joseph (Gen. 30:25-31:21; 41:37-45). In these stories, the idea of property includes land, slaves, and personal property such as gold and clothing. The references to the ownership of land are particularly interesting in view of the fact that the patriarchs were essentially nomads.

*Second day.*—Exod. 21:2-23:13. With the entrance of the Israelites into Canaan, their form of civilization changed from the nomadic to that of a people living in towns and fields. The character of wealth changed also, and much more importance is given to land tenure. The early legislation (Exod. 21:2-23:13 recognizes individual rights of landowners) has a considerable number of laws dealing with the holding and use of land.

*Third day.*—§ 91. *As the nation developed, the increase of wealth gave rise to new moral problems and consequent ethical teaching:* I Kings, chap. 21. The story of Ahab's confiscation of the vineyard of Naboth is a good illustration of the problems which wealth brings. As the economic life of the Hebrew state became more complex, moral problems of a new sort emerged. This is an illustration of the process which goes on in every society that accumulates capital and in which the increase of population gives increased value to land.

*Fourth day.*—*New economic conditions were exploited by the powerful people and the poor suffered:* Isa. 10:1-4; Jer. 22:3-5; Amos 3:9-15; 5:11-15; chap. 6; Mic. 7:2, 3; 3:9-12. In Israel, as in modern times, the possession of wealth often made men lawless. All the prophetic writers abound in the bitterest denunciation of the accumulation of ill-gotten wealth, and the private or public perversion of justice. Read the passages cited.

*Fifth day.*—§ 92. *In the teaching of the Hebrew sages more attention was given to the right use of wealth, as well as to general moral principles:* Prov. 11:24-26; 13:7, 8; 14:31; 21:5, 6; 16:19; 28:20, 27; 29:7, 14; 30:9. These and other sayings of the wise abound in warnings against too great striving after riches, and the cultivation of the proper attitude toward the poor.

*Sixth day.*—§ 93. *The teaching of the Old Testament was elaborated, but its fraternal quality was not fully appreciated by the Pharisees:* Luke 16:14-31. Read

this passage carefully, remembering that the point of approach is in vs. 14. Do we not see that in this parable Jesus teaches that the Pharisees had sufficient teaching in the Old Testament as to the right use of wealth? If they did not follow that, would they believe if someone came from the dead to tell them how selfish men are to be punished?

*Seventh day.*—§ 94. *The messianic ideal among the Jews included, not only political deliverance, but the release of the poor from poverty:* Luke 1:46-55; 3:7-14. The evidence for this can be seen, not only in the messianic literature of the Pharisees (the song of Mary, Luke 1:46-55), but also in the history of the revolt against Rome, 66-70 A.D. From this point of view one can appreciate better why the *poor* flocked to the messianic preaching of John the Baptist. Remembering that John the Baptist was preparing men for the day of judgment which he believed was soon to come, read Luke 3:7-14 and notice how large an importance he gives to generosity. Does he insist, however, that a man shall give away all that he possesses?

## II. THE LIFE OF JESUS IS A LESSON IN THE SECONDARY VALUE OF WEALTH

The life of Jesus is not to be copied literally. On this the Christian world is agreed. He exemplified what he taught, but his example cannot always be universalized except as regards the principles which in his own day and land he individually embodied. In the case of the family this was evident. In order to be like Christ one does not need to be unmarried. Nor, in order to be a Christian, does one need to abandon one's occupation. The principles, however, which led Jesus to abandon his occupation must be wholly ours, and some of us may need to do precisely what he did in that regard, because in our case the application of his principles to what we regard as life makes us dependent upon the economic life of others.

Yet the teaching of Jesus can be fully appreciated only as we gain a knowledge of his life. We must remember that he lived in a world when industry was not organized as it is in our day, where there were no great manufactories, where slavery still was recognized by law, where democracy was undreamed of, and where those ethical ideals which he himself contributed to history had not been embodied in legislation. In such a society Jesus lived and to it he gave an illustration of his own teaching in accordance with its needs.

*Eighth day.*—§ 95. *The family of Jesus was poor, but not properly speaking proletarian (of the lower class of his day):* Luke 2:22-39. The New Testament makes it very plain that he was a member of a family of good social standing and that he was descended from David. The poverty of the family is to be inferred from Luke 2:22-39. Strictly speaking, he was not a peasant. He was one of the great mass of Palestinian Jews who found themselves oppressed by the tax-collector. The general poverty of the land appears in the writings of Josephus and the rabbis.

*Ninth day.*—*Jesus himself was an artisan:* Mark 6:1-6a; Matt. 13:54-58. This passage would argue that he did not occupy an important position in Nazareth because of wealth. Some of the legends which grew up in the church have to do with his being a maker of "plows and yokes," and miraculously helping Joseph out of mistakes due to his bad workmanship. It is not altogether clear, however,

just what trade Jesus actually followed. He is commonly spoken of as a carpenter, and yet the Greek word may be interpreted to mean that he was a contractor or builder. It is noticeable that in his teaching he draws almost no illustrations from artisan life, but usually from agriculture and to some extent from commerce.

*Tenth day.*—*In his public ministry he was obviously poor:* Luke 8:1-3; Matt. 8:19, 20 (Luke 9:57, 58); Matt. 17:24-27; John 13:28, 29. Read the first two passages. It is to be borne in mind, however, that though thus poor and supported by gifts, Jesus was not a beggar. He neither practiced nor advised begging, and the strange and difficult story of Matt. 17:24-27 shows that he was ready to pay the Temple tax. John 13:28, 29 would argue that he was accustomed out of his poverty to help the poor.

*Eleventh day.*—§ 96. *The poverty of Jesus gave him deeper sympathy with the poor, but did not prevent his friendship with the rich:* Luke 19:1-10; 5:27-32; Matt. 27:57, 58. This fact must be remembered when we come to the teaching of Jesus. It is, however, not to be overemphasized. Jesus did not commercialize his power to make friends. His relations with the rich, like his relations with the poor, were based upon the desire to be spiritually helpful. We shall recur to this later in our study of Jesus' teaching as to social customs. For present purposes we refer to such intercourse as he had with men like Zaccheus (Luke 19:1-10) Levi (Luke. 5:27-32), Joseph of Arimathea (Matt. 27:57, 58), only to show that Jesus was not an economic agitator. To make him the exponent of economic class-consciousness is utterly to misinterpret his attitude and message.

*Twelfth day.*—*The sympathy of Jesus with the poor did not make him bitter or ascetic:* Luke 4:1-13. Neither in his actions nor in his words is there any ground for considering him a leader of industrial revolt. His appeal to the masses was moral, not economic. To speak of Jesus as a labor leader is not only anachronistic (for we have no knowledge of a labor movement in Palestine, whatever may have been true of the rest of the Roman Empire), but it is to distort his fundamental message. From this point of view re-read the story of the Temptation and notice how in at least one of the temptations Jesus faced this very problem of being a leader of revolt (Luke 4:1-13). We shall return to this in the discussion of Jesus' teaching concerning political life. Attention is now drawn to it because of the rather widespread fashion to make the interest shown by Jesus in the poor that of a member of an economic class, rather than that of a teacher of a spiritual message to which the poor have as much right as the rich. To the joyous task of giving this message Jesus subordinated all other interests. That was his method of living the life of love. What he had he gave.

### III. THE TEACHING OF JESUS CONCERNING WEALTH

As we come to the words of Jesus with a recognition of historical relations, we are again impressed with his effort to make men see the moral implications of their daily life. His paramount interest lay in saving men from the control of unworthy motives and secondary goods such as he believed wealth and physical life itself to be. He would extend love into all aspects of life. Only as we recognize this method of Jesus can we avoid the mistake of interpreting him from the point of view of modern economic theory. He was no more a political economist than he was a sociologist.

*Thirteenth day.*—§ 97. *Jesus taught that wealth is to be subordinated to all spiritual goods:* Matt. 6:24-34; Luke 12:22-34; 9:25. Read the references carefully and notice how Jesus makes wealth a secondary good. It is from this perspective that we must judge his words. He is interested, not in wealth, but in people who have wealth. When he sees them falling into the attractive mistake of subordinating all life to the search for material goods he utters warning with the vehemence of the ancient prophet.

*Fourteenth day.*—Mark 10:23-31 (Matt. 19:23-30; Luke 18:24-30). These references show that Jesus saw moral dangers in the possession of wealth.

*Fifteenth day.*—Luke 6:24; Matt. 6:19-21; Luke 14:25-35. Similarly notice the words of Luke 6:24 and compare them with Matt. 6:19-21; Luke 14:25-35.

*Sixteenth day.*—§ 98. *Jesus taught neither communism nor socialism:* Acts, chap. 4. The early church practiced neither communism nor socialism. We sometimes speak carelessly of the communism of the early church. It would be far more accurate to speak of the prodigal generosity of the first disciples. Read Acts, chap. 4. It is certainly not communistic to take up a collection.

*Seventeenth day.*—Rom. 15:26-33; I Cor. 16:1-4. The Pauline teaching with special reference to the collection he was taking up for the poor Christians of Palestine will be found in his letter to the Romans, 15:26-33, and to the Corinthians, I Cor. 16:1-4.

*Eighteenth day.*—§ 99. *Jesus does not make poverty either a blessing or a curse:* Mark 6:8-10; Luke 10:1-12; Luke 16:14-31; Luke 6:20; Matt. 11:2-6. That he does not regard poverty as necessarily a curse appears from Mark 6:8-10; Luke 10:1-12. That he does not regard it as a blessing is true from silence. He does, however, teach that the poor can have the gospel preached to them and that they are blessed because, although they are poor, they possess the Kingdom of God. The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:14-31) cannot be interpreted to teach that all poor men are to be saved and all rich men are to be damned. Yet the fact that most of the people who did follow Jesus were poor is an argument that his sympathies, in so far as they recognized any social class, were with them. Read Luke 6:20; Matt. 11:2-6.

*Nineteenth day.*—§ 100. *Although wealth is a secondary good, Jesus does not teach that his followers should be beggars:* Mark 1:16-20 (Matt. 4:18-22); II Thess. 3:10; I Thess. 4:11. True, Jesus called his immediate disciples away from their daily occupation (Mark 1:16-20 [Matt. 4:18-22]). There is no evidence, however, that he made such an abandonment of daily life a test of discipleship. Read Paul's interpretation of Christian duty (II Thess. 3:10; cf. also I Thess. 4:11).

*Twentieth day.*—§ 101. *The heart of the economic teaching of Jesus is this: Wealth is to be used generously in order to extend friendship; i.e., according to the principles of love:* Luke 16:1-13. To discover Jesus' conception as to how wealth should be used read carefully Luke 16:1-13. In this parable the central thought is found in vs. 9. The rascality of the steward is a mere incident. He knew how to use money to make friends, and his method was that of giving wealth away. This is the one specific teaching of Jesus as to how his principles affect the economic life.

*Twenty-first day.*—Matt. 5:42 (Luke 6:30); Luke 12:33, 34; Mark 10:17-22 (Matt. 19:16-22); Luke 18:18-23; 19:1-10; Acts 20:34, 35. How constantly Jesus insisted on giving money to those who needed it is to be seen in Matt. 5:42 (Luke 6:30) Luke 12:33, 34; Mark 10:17-22 (Matt. 19:16-22; Luke 18:18-23). An interesting commentary on this teaching will be found in Luke 19:1-10; see also Acts 20:34, 35. Is not such teaching an extension to economic matters of the fundamental ideal of Jesus? Notice the sacrificial element.

*Twenty-second day.*—Matt. 5:43-48. Yet we cannot see in this teaching a distinct economic program; there is rather a perception of moral values and an emphasis upon the necessity of love and helpfulness, as well as on the temptations that beset the possessors of wealth. Would Jesus insist that a man should give away his money in order to be good or that he should give away money because other people needed help? Again consider carefully Matt. 5:43-48.

#### IV. APPLICATION OF THE TEACHING OF JESUS

Sanity is demanded in any attempt to make the teaching of Jesus apply to our industrial order. The world in which he lived was so different from our own that it can be counted only fortunate that he did not leave any detailed teaching upon economic matters. To have made such application might have embodied in Christianity social practices which would have hindered its development.

Yet, on the other hand, the fact that he does not discuss modern economic matters does not argue that he is indifferent to the moral problems involved in economic relations. Our study has shown how intensely interested he is in the spiritual dangers which confront the rich. We should not represent his teaching so as to limit its economic significance to his directions to give money away. To help the poor by gifts is only one application of his underlying moral and religious principles. Every Christian must decide whether a given practice or tendency in the industrial order violates these fundamental principles of Jesus. It is from this point of view alone that we can apply his words to our economic life.

*Twenty-third day.*—*There is something higher than business success.* Can there be one set of moral ideals for the business world and another for our individual life? Presumably the answer to such a question would be in the negative. Yet, when it comes to a practical decision, it is sometimes very easy to say that the moral ideals of Jesus are impracticable and that it is sometimes necessary, in order to succeed in business, to adopt a course of conduct which we admit is not so much in accordance with the ideals of Jesus as with the practices of some of our contemporaries. What do you think would be the attitude of Jesus if he were in our place when such an issue arose? Suppose, for instance, that honesty, or a spirit of kindness for one's competitors, would lead to bankruptcy; should a man be honest and self-sacrificing if he can avoid bankruptcy by the opposite method? This issue is one which every man has sometimes to face, and it is very simple; namely, Shall I be loyal to the fundamental teaching of the Master at the cost of sacrifice?

*Twenty-fourth day.*—*The Christian attitude toward the conflict between labor and capital as well as to all other economic conflicts is more than that of justice; it is that of sacrifice of privilege for the sake of fraternity.* Any thoughtful student of

the New Testament can find an illustration of this principle in the relation of Jesus' teaching to slavery. Jesus never attacks slavery, much less champions it. He simply does not discuss it. Yet wherever his principles of love and fraternity have permeated, slavery has disappeared. We can argue the inevitable effect of this same teaching upon the wage system of today. For in the conflict between the employed and employer classes the real issue is between men, not abstractions, and men can be changed in motive and in attitude by Christianity. The application of the fundamental principle of Jesus to the men of today will lead to the equalization of economic privileges as they develop in our modern world. Should it not be one duty of the church to educate men and women to see that economic issues are moral? If one generation could be made sensitive to this conception, the sense of mutual obligation in our industrial world would be a source of better understanding and of economic peace.

*Twenty-fifth day.*—*If men are determined to give one another justice according to the principles of Jesus, they are free to determine the best method in which this may be accomplished in their economic life.* Just what change in our industrial order would be necessary to bring about the Christian adjustment of interests now opposed to each other remains to be seen. There are many programs, each of which claims to be the only one that a man can adopt if he wishes to be thoroughly just and fraternal. Socialism, the single tax, collective bargaining, governmental control of monopolies, are some of these. The argument of each is the same: it is the one expression in economic life of that spirit of justice and love which Jesus inculcates. But this argument assumes what we really need to know, namely, that the proposed program is really practicable and fair to all parties concerned. It may be that the spirit of Jesus, if only it can operate in social evolution, would lead to an economic organization of society far superior to any one of these theoretical programs. Jesus does not furnish programs, but ideals and character.

*Twenty-sixth day.*—*The ideals of Jesus are more far-reaching in economic affairs than his own specific application of them.* Jesus makes only one application of his principle of brotherhood to economic affairs, namely, the giving away of money. He says nothing about the methods by which wealth is gained. That is to say, he is silent concerning the processes of production. Yet it is in this that our modern world finds its chief conflicts; for it is here that the wage system is met. True, the principle of giving might be extended to industry by saying that a man should make gifts by refusing to make as much money as he might otherwise; but such use of terms would serve to confuse men's minds. Wage-earners want justice and not charity. From their point of view the employer might be said to be giving what really was not his to give. At all events, it cannot be denied that Jesus would condemn a man who, having grown rich at the expense of the rights of others, gives his money away. In our modern world his teachings must be made to answer, not only the question as to what one is to do with his wealth, but the other as to how he gets his wealth. Make this personal. Does part of your income come from underpaid men, women, and children? Do you believe it right in business to take advantage of another's misfortune? If you are a wage-earner are you treating your employer—regardless of his treatment of you—in a brotherly fashion?

*Twenty-seventh day.*—*The principles of Jesus apply primarily to people and not to property.* The political economist too often forgets that questions of wealth are really questions of personality. The teaching of Jesus applies not only to those who have what we call fortunes, but quite as truly to men who are wage-earners, or who are on a salary. They, too, must face the moral question whether they will make spiritual goods or material goods supreme in their lives. It would be a misinterpretation of Jesus to say that he preached only privileges for the poor and only obligations for the rich. Both classes alike are under obligations to adopt Jesus' ideals. It is not following Jesus to store up one's wealth, nor is it following him to hold on to economic privileges until they are forced from us. Undoubtedly those with privileges practice the larger sacrifice.

*Twenty-eighth day.*—*Belief in Jesus means belief in the practicability and efficiency of his teaching as applied to economic life.* It is sometimes easier to believe that Jesus can save after death than to believe his teachings are true when applied to life. Yet such a distinction is virtually a denial of his supremacy. Within the limits set by his teaching there is opportunity for all the scientific knowledge we can gain from sociology, political economy, and experience. But to disbelieve that his principles of brotherhood are to control economic life is to deny him. Whoever takes him seriously must believe that the application of his teachings would carry the world toward economic justice. In fact, a knowledge of the history of the development of modern society shows that only in so far as men have moved toward the Golden Rule has there been satisfactory settlement of industrial disputes. It is not only that conflicts must be settled righteously; they must be settled generously. For love is higher than mere justice. This can be illustrated in almost any case of industrial conflict with which you are familiar.

*Twenty-ninth day.*—*The message of the cross to economic life.* If our economic society is ever to be thoroughly Christian at least three things are indispensable: first, individuals must be educated to take the Christian attitude of fraternity in their economic relations; secondly, legislation touching upon economic affairs must tend to democratize economic privilege and, by emphasizing the worth of personality, give larger equality in the sharing of the material goods of life; and thirdly, business success at the expense of brotherhood and justice must be seen to be contrary to the divine will. There is one saying of Jesus we must constantly use to test our individual and social life in their economic activity: "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own life?" The hope of bringing about fraternity in society will be futile until men are ready to follow Jesus, not only in the realm of noble thinking, but also in his sacrifice of personal comfort and advantage in the interests of others.

It is at this point that the gospel is indispensable. For the gospel is the revelation through Jesus that God is love and that the way to be like him is to be loving. Believing this truth, revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we dare make economic as well as other sacrifices in the interest of that brotherhood which comes from divine sonship. In such sacrifice we are co-workers with God.